

City of Los Altos Park Off-Leash Pilot Program

The City of Los Altos is implementing a pilot program for allowing dogs off-leash in City parks during specified hours. The pilot program will run October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020. During this period dogs will be allowed to run off leash in designated parks during specified times in the morning and afternoon. City ordinance (m.c. 5.08.010) will be in effect outside of the specified hours and at non-designated parks.

PURPOSE

The off-leash program is intended to provide time in existing parks for local residents to exercise their dogs off-leash in a larger space than their private property. Two parks have been selected for this pilot program and were chosen to provide opportunity for access in different parts of the community.

Currently, there is no fenced off-leash dog park in Los Altos. Fenced off-leash dog parks are preferred for use any time of the day while keeping separation between dogs and people. The construction of a dog park requires capital funding and space on public land. Currently, the City has 45 acres of park land in Los Altos.

Pilot Program

Locations

The two off-leash parks were chosen to provide multiple options for community members to exercise their dogs. Location selection is also intended to avoid adjacency to high vehicle traffic areas. Less traffic and slower speed limits on adjacent streets will reduce the chances of incidents between cars and out of control dogs. Another consideration in the selection of the locations was to avoid placing dogs on sports fields while in-season. When reviewing the pilot program, the Parks and Recreation Commission took into account dogs relieving themselves on the park turf and did not want to expose youth and adults that may encounter dog urine or feces that may be left by negligent owners while playing on the sports field. The following are the two park locations recommended for the off-leash pilot program.

- 1) Heritage Oaks Park – The large open grass area of Heritage Oaks is a popular place for dog owners to bring their dogs. Some owners have been seen allowing their dogs to run free in this area of the park. This park was chosen as one of the two pilot locations because of its space, distance from major streets, and geographic location in the south/central end of the city. Although parking is limited it is expected that a good number of the users would be within walking distance due to the park's location in a dense residential area.
- 2) Hillview Park Baseball Field – The semi-enclosed baseball field at Hillview Park is currently used by the Recreation & Community Services dog obedience class contractor. It is an ideal location that would be considered on the northern end of Los Altos and is far from traffic of any kind. The usage by Little League was considered by the Parks and Recreation Commission. The recommendation that came of this location is to use it for off-leash only during the baseball off-season (July-February).

Other Los Altos parks considered

There are probably multiple reasons that these parks are not being recommended as part of the pilot program, but here are the main reasons as considered by the Parks and Recreation Commission and staff.

McKenzie Park – Turf drainage issues

Shoup Park – Limited space for free running dogs

Lincoln Park – Close to expressway, no restrooms

Marymeade Park – Too close to a major street

Hours of Operation

Bay area agencies that allow off-leash dogs in public parks have scheduled hours of usage in a way that minimizes interaction between regular park users, vehicle traffic and dogs. All Bay Area agencies that were studied schedule off-leash dog hours either in the morning, early evening, or both. Scheduling off-leash hours in the early morning gives dog owners the opportunity to exercise their dogs prior to going to work or school while using a park during a time that sees minimal usage from the general public. Morning hours for these agencies range from as early as 5:00am to as late as 10:00am.

Scheduling off-leash hours in the early evening allows dog owners to return from work or school and still have a place to exercise their dogs. The early evening time is also a time when general park use is winding down. Los Altos parks do not have sports lighting, so regular users in the parks at that time are lower.

After Commission consideration and recommendation, staff is recommending that for the pilot program period, the hours of the off-leash usage at the two parks will be the following.

Hillview Baseball Field (July 1 – February 28 ONLY)

Monday-Sunday 6:00am-9am & 6pm-sunset (July-September)

Monday-Friday 7:00am-9am & 4pm-sunset (October-February)

Heritage Oaks Parks:

Monday-Friday 6:30am-9am

Saturday & Sunday 7:30-9am

Off-Leash Rules

All off-leash areas for dogs will have explicit rules for usage. Fenced-in dog parks and off-leash areas in parks both require standards and rules for the dogs and owners. Rules that ensure dogs stay under owner control are especially important for off-leash areas in parks. The following rules will be enforced as part of the off-leash pilot program.

OFF-LEASH RULES

TBD

Staff took into consideration the recommended rules that were created by the Parks and Recreation Commission, as well as rules currently in-use by other agencies, when creating these rules. The rules listed here will be posted at each of the parks, placed at what is expected to be locations owners would enter the park with their dogs.

Enforcement of the off-leash rules was discussed with the Los Altos Police Department. On June 25, Los Altos City Council approved the agreement extension for animal control services. As part of the extension, the City of Los Altos and the City of Palo Alto updated the scope of services to include assisting Los Altos Police with animal patrols and complaints. Under the new agreement, on-duty Animal Control Officers would serve as primary enforcement of animal related patrols and complaints during Animal Control Officers regular hours. The potential for off-leash hours at the two designated parks has been discussed with the Animal Control representative and the scope of the new agreement has been reaffirmed.

It can be expected that early enforcement will include a great deal of education of dog owners. The most anticipated area of education and enforcement will likely be owners not abiding by the designated hours of off-leash in the parks. It is being observed that there are dog owners currently violating the leash ordinance (M.C. 5.08.010) at several Los Altos parks at various times of the day. With two off-leash locations to take their dogs, we are not certain all owners will desire to make the trip to one of the parks and within the designated time. This is when the education and enforcement will need to take place. Citations??? Having designated locations and times dogs will be off-leash would hopefully eliminate unlawful usage of parks for off-leash dogs.

Potential Program Issues

There are three potential issues that have been identified. The first and most obvious is the interaction between dogs and park users or other dog owners. It is always feared that dogs allowed off-leash have the potential to hurt people they are not familiar with. This occasionally happens in the form of a dog bite, but more often happens when a dog knocks someone over by jumping on them or just bumping them. It has been observed in other agencies that large dogs sometimes do this to unsuspecting people. The scheduling of the program, and in the case of Hillview baseball field is meant to minimize the interaction of dogs with unsuspecting park users. It is also a rule that dogs being taken out to the off-leash areas are able to be controlled by voice command.

Another concern of this program is the potential for dogs to run out of the park and into the street. Staff and the Parks and Recreation Commission evaluated this scenario and feel the semi-fenced area of the Hillview baseball field should almost eliminate that possibility at that location. Heritage Oaks is the bigger issue with its adjacency to Portland and McKenzie Avenues. These are neighborhood streets that have a speed limit of 35 and 25, respectively. Ultimately, a dog being controllable by voice command would prevent the dog from making it all the way to the street, but if it was to make it the lower speed limits will give drivers a greater reaction time.

The third potential issue with the off-leash program is the turf wear on the park. Dogs dig holes when given the opportunity. Another rule that owners must abide by is preventing digging. If dogs are allowed to dig it will create less than desirable conditions on the turf that Maintenance staff will have to

attend to with staff time and turf materials. Staff is anticipating needing to invest some time and materials to maintain the two park locations as a result of the dog usage, especially the Little League field, but avoiding excessive damage is what is desired.

Evaluation of the Program

Being a pilot program, staff will be evaluating its feasibility as an ongoing program after the pilot period.

Fenced Dog Park

There is currently a recommendation from the Parks and Recreation Commission to convert the Fremont Avenue-adjacent portion of McKenzie Park into a fenced dog park.

DRAFT